

TO THE PRELATES, NATIONAL REPRESENTATIVE ASSEMBLIES OF THE NORTH AMERICAN PRELACIES(*)

I greet you from the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, in Antelias, Lebanon, with Christian love and Pontifical blessing.

I spent almost six weeks with you in Canada and in the United States of America. We met in churches and schools. We met during formal receptions and at community centers. This Pontifical visit gave me an excellent opportunity to spend more time with different segments of our people, and to become familiar with achievements, plans and concerns of our communities, and with the challenges they face. In the context of this visitation program, I held important meetings with state, political, academic and religious officials, gave lectures at universities and presided over international conferences in Los Angeles, New York and Boston.

The celebration of our Seminary's 75th anniversary occupied an important part of my agenda. In fact, our efforts to bring into focus, on a pan-diaspora scale, the Seminary's 75 years of service will undoubtedly become a source of spiritual joy for all of us. This celebration will also become a great challenge for our Catholicosate to renew the Seminary's mission vis-a-vis the world's new imperatives and the growing needs of our church and people.

As a result of the dedicated and strenuous work of our Prelates, Executive Committees and National Representative Assemblies, our communities are well organized and are in continuous progress in all areas of their common life. I also witnessed, with profound joy, that people, including intellectuals and youth, are gathered around our churches and cultural, social, political and humanitarian organizations, and are actively participating in community initiatives and functions. This is, indeed, a highly encouraging phenomenon that needs to be more expanded and continued with growing pace.

Upon my return to Antelias, I would like to share with you, rather briefly, some perspectives and concerns, and make some suggestions with a forward looking vision.

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RENEWAL OF FAITH

In my sermons and messages I strongly emphasized the vital importance of the renewal of Christian faith. Human life loses its authentic identity and true purpose without faith. In a world of uncertainties and conflicts, today's society is searching for meaning and self-understanding. The drive for meaning and identity is evident in the American society today. I also witnessed such a quest in our people. It is only by strengthening our faith and deepening our spirituality that we can discover our true identity and vocation in this world.

(*) This is the summary of the Pontifical Message of His Holiness Aram I. The original is in Armenian.

If our attachment to spiritual and moral values is emotional, it will be short-lived and superficial. It should, rather, become a dynamic and continuous process, that transforms our lives through the presence of God. This process of recovery, rediscovery and renewal of Christian faith should avoid foreign traditions and rituals, forms and approaches. The renewal of Christian faith and spiritual and moral values in the life of our faithful should be guided by our church. I consider this deepening and renewing of Christian faith to be our most important mission. As Armenians, it is also crucially important to make our centuries-old traditions and values relevant and credible to new environments and circumstances. Our clergy has a particular role to play in this urgent task.

GIVING EFFICIENCY TO THE CHURCH'S MISSION

The church is not only the nurturer of faith; it is also the transmitter of faith. It is with such a firm commitment that the Armenian Church should come out of its narrow boundaries of ritual and administration, and enter into the people's lives. The church is the people of God. It fulfills its true being and vocation by becoming a church with the people and for the people. The church is a missionary reality; it is outreach. This character of the church has acquired an existential articulation in the Armenian Church. Our church is the church of people *par excellence*. Our parish churches are called to play an instrumental role in taking the church to people and making it a serving and transforming reality.

The Armenian Church's vocation is to respond to people's needs, find solutions to their concerns and enrich their lives with spiritual, moral and national values, aspirations and traditions. Its role is also community-building; a role historically trusted to our church, particularly in the diaspora. Therefore, I expect our parish churches, the bases of our Prelacies ecclesiologically and administratively speaking, to be better organized and well equipped in their educational, evangelical and diakonal functions. This is one of the top priorities before our Prelacies.

RE-ORGANIZATION OF CHRISTIAN AND ARMENIAN EDUCATION

A remarkable work continues to be accomplished in our communities in this area under the direction of the Prelacies. In the context of religious education, Sunday schools have been set up, Bible studies have been organized, youth meetings are held and there are growing efforts to make religious education more efficient in our community schools. The Christian education and formation should be made more attractive for the new generation. By making better use of new technology reaching our children and youth more effectively must remain a major concern.

As far as Armenian education is concerned, our Prelacies allocate an important part of their time and human resources to schools, thereby demonstrating strong commitment to the Armenian education of our new generation. Thus, they constantly devise new plans and programs and embark on new initiatives; and they give important part of their budget to schools. In my private meetings, as well as in my public interventions, I emphasized the imperative of giving a focal attention to Armenian education. We must develop a new educational policy taking into consideration the changing realities, growing needs and emerging challenges. Our schools should be better organized. New schools should be built, especially in densely Armenian populated regions. Well-planned special courses should be held for Armenian students attending non-Armenian schools because of

geographic remoteness. All this requires, first, serious planning which our Prelacies should embark on; second, an injection of financial resources which our people should be ready to provide; and, third, firm engagement on the part of our parents to send their children to Armenian schools.

PREPARATION OF NEW HUMAN-POWER

The above mentioned projects and actions, that need to be undertaken in different areas of our community life, primarily imply human-power. We need the kind of people who are professional; who are well acquainted with the particularities and concerns of our community life, and who are ready to serve our church and people. Only people with vision and such quality can render fruitful services to our community. We should consider long gone those times when our communities in America were hectically looking for human resources from abroad. Today there exists a great potential of new leadership in Canada and the United States.

I gladly noticed that youth, born and formed in America, are ready to commit themselves to the service of our people. Our churches, structures and organizations will lose their attractiveness and importance for the generations to come if they fail to act immediately and responsibly in preparing a new committed generation today; tomorrow could be too late in a world which is in a rapid and radical change.

COOPERATION: THE WAY TO UNITY

This is the message that I constantly repeated to our leadership and people. There are prevailing divergences and sensitivities in our communities. I consider it essential to develop the sort of realistic approaches and common processes that could enable our communities to seek proper solutions to their local problems. Meanwhile, however, I also consider it imperative for church and community leaders and our people to come together around pan-national values, principles and interests. Cooperation between Diocese and Prelacy, and among political parties and various organizations should be deepened and enlarged. It is through close cooperation that our spiritual, cultural, educational, and other community organizations will become more active and dynamic. It is through frank cooperation that our people will gather around our structures manifesting concretely their Armenianness. It is through practical cooperation that we will ensure our nation's integrity and foster our church's unity. Finally, it is through active cooperation that we will strengthen the Diaspora and consequently encourage more active participation in nation-building process in Armenia.

In fact, when the people, and particularly the new generation, do not see and experience this cooperation, they will, with time, withdraw from our churches and communities. If we remain attached to traditional views and unrealistic approaches and fail to seek new avenues of dialogue and communication, new possibilities of reflecting and working together, then our communities will be eventually doomed to self-isolation and disintegration. We must be far-sighted and realistic.

RE-AFFIRMING OUR COMMITMENT TO THE ARMENIAN CAUSE

Along with other achievements and positive factors, I witnessed with great appreciation the growing efforts aimed at the promotion of the Armenian Cause. The Armenian National Committees are engaged in intensive and systematic work. In fact, the recognition of the Armenian Genocide by the Canadian Parliament last year and by some state parliaments in the United States, and the draft resolution presented to the US House of Representatives were the fruit of serious work achieved by National Committees over the years.

In this context I deeply appreciated the working relationship established by our young specialists in political science and international law with a number of congressmen, congresswomen and senators, particularly in the USA. I also came to know, with great satisfaction, the wide knowledge of American and Canadian politicians concerning the Armenian Cause and their readiness to bring their assistance to the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. I advised the Central Armenian National Committee that their efforts towards the Armenian Cause should continue with new impetus, and our approaches and emphases must be constantly revised according to the changing political circumstances. Our Prelacies will, in their turn, continue to bring their full participation in all activities related to the Armenian Cause. The Armenian Cause is also the Armenian Church's cause, as it is the Cause of all Armenians.

TRUSTING THE YOUTH

In my dialogue with the Armenian university students and the youth, I noted a prevailing confusion in respect to issues and concerns pertaining to present societies in general, and the Armenian life in particular. I also realized that the new generation basically suffers from a psychological complex of being left on the margins of community life. The new generation needs guidance and assistance. I therefore consider dialogue with the youth crucial for the future course of our church and community in North America.

In my public lectures and encounters with the youth, I told them that youth do not belong to the future, but to the present. Keeping the present as it is would mean living in the past. The old should be renewed with the new and the new should be strengthened by the old. The new generation is called to participate responsibly and actively in our current life, even on the leadership level. The youth is challenged to provide its expertise, its new approaches, its courage to open up to new horizons and its commitment to renewing our community life in all its dimensions and manifestations. This is the unique vocation of the youth.

Therefore, we do not have the right to reserve the youth for the future and consider them as passive followers. The youth should be trusted; a meaningful dialogue should be initiated with them. I have already started this year a direct dialogue with our youth addressing them on two occasions. I believe in the power and potential of youth. I believe in the ability of youth to bring a special contribution to community-building. It is also my firm expectation that those young people, who still remain on the periphery of our common life or have grown apart from our communities for various reasons, will return to us and take full part in our church and community life. Our youth must know that they have a spiritual father here in Antelias, who is ready to listen to them and to engage in frank dialogue with them.

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I would like once more to remind our church and community leaders in North America that our people have great expectations from the Armenian Church. I am sure that our Prelates and Prelacies will continue their spiritual mission and service with the profound sense of responsibility and dedication, taking into serious consideration the thoughts, concerns and recommendations that I briefly outlined.

The Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia will continue to assist all programs and activities that are aimed at the renewal of faith, the promotion of spiritual, cultural and national values and the strengthening of our unity.

I pray to God Almighty to enrich our Prelates' and Prelacies dedicated service with new achievements.

May God bless you all.

**ARAM I
CATHOLICOS OF CILICIA**

*10 November 2005
Antelias*